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The Woods Watch

Spotting climate change in the Catskills with longtime locals

Tracy Raczek



CRACKS IN THE SEDIMENTARY SHALE HAVE BIRTHED HUNDREDS OF hillside springs in the Catskill forests of upstate New York. Their gentle gurgling—which trickles or surges depending on the season, slope, and rain-fall—often lures me from the forest’s deep, dry shadows into glaring emerald clearings with miniature bogs. It is a temptation to creep into the direct sunlight and closer to the sound. But, finally I resign to step my slurpy boot backward again, so that I won’t disturb the delicate ecosystem.

Circling these emerald clearings are feral apple trees abandoned by earlier settlers, passing birds, and deer scat. Some visitors to this land see its spirit first in the exquisitely gnarled branches of these wizened apple trees. It can be enchanting to encounter a woodland’s spirit through the most intimate of wooden doors, the apple tree—a tree of childhood nursery rhymes, easy climbs, and American legends.

I found my first spirit door on this land not in a wily live apple tree, but in a dead hickory tree. The broken snag stood 30 feet tall and 4 feet around. Striped yellow and red, charred with black mold, and pocked with rot and bird holes, the old hickory nonetheless stoutly guarded an entrance to the land’s spirit.

It is difficult to speak of all that can be seen in the world past such an entrance when one surrenders to spirit as much as to science.

Underground there is an endless pitch-black world where chemistry and seeming magic decide the fate of matter. A network of fungi speaks in code, breaking apart ancient shale to siphon unseeable scraps of carbon, nitrogen, and minerals upward to plant life and trees overhead. Above ground in the Catskills, some trees tower majestically while others languish. Ash and maple trees struggle the most.

I have spent decades applying science to serve the environment and sorting through climate solutions, with many years in the deep woods of the middle and western United States. But I am a relative newcomer to the Catskills. And so, to better understand these hills and the Catskill ecosystems, I rely on good-natured neighbors to reveal their phenological observations, seasonal patterns that only locals know—of the first snow each winter, the first ramps of spring, and which tree typically buds before others.

My neighbor Gianni noticed maples ailing in a hilltop grove on his land. He and his wife, Angela, walk the forest daily, each of them reverently

Looking up at old trees and listening to longtime locals help the author understand change in the Catskills. TRACY RACZEK

reciting trees' species as they pass. Gianni is a consummate woodworker who has painstakingly crafted trees into art, furniture, and a home. He is also a retired cell biologist who emphatically claims to be a pure empiricist. Yet he extols each tree's unique qualities as if it was his very own—and very perfect—grandchild. He fawns over each gall discovered on a tree as if it were a newborn. And his voice cracks, distraught, when he speaks of the maples' ailments. I believe he and Angela also see the spirit in these hills, but I cannot ask as I have promised the hickory not to divulge too much.

I now notice these maples struggling on our land. The maples' crowns are increasingly barren of leaves and paltrier each spring, as if pelted by a hail that never came. Their roots seem somehow disconnected from the underworld. From northern Wisconsin to Maine, many maple species are declining due to the warming climate. Heavier rainfalls and warmer shoulder seasons stress the trees. Less snowpack in winter exposes the roots to cold snaps. And although some maple species will fare better than others, with sugar maples struggling worst of all, their overall domain is expected to recede northward as the decades and warming inexorably continue.

Ash trees currently fare no better. The emerald ash borer—on a steady march through the mid-Atlantic and now in 35 states—is projected to forever change eastern forests, the understory, and autumn palettes. In lockstep with invasive bark beetles of the western United States and Canada, these insects are surviving warming winters without the steady deep freezes of past years and are killing tens of millions of acres of trees each year. Hikers, hunters, and sugar-makers bear witness to this demolition.

So does our neighbor Mary, who at 86 years old knows these woods well. She rides the rolling roads of our county in her horse-drawn two-wheeled carriage, with hands twisted and gnarled like the branches of an old apple tree from years of holding the reins. When younger she rode her Icelandic pony atop the cliffs above our cabin. Now she is fused to her horse-drawn carriage like a virtual centaur and frequently falls into a trance, local knowledge and folklore cascading down—of the disappearing blueberry bushes on the ridgetop; of the well running dry near the abandoned stone foundation; and of the birds singing for berries that she hopes will surround the soggy green meadows for years after she is gone. I steel myself to remember as much as I can—for my next ramble up to the ridgetop in search of any remaining blueberry bushes.

On the way to the ridge, I will pull out invasive plants as best I can, disturb the least I can, and pay attention to signs of change. I will pass that

snapped hickory snag, in those well-guarded woodlands, and walk through a field of massive boulders, each almost as tall as my neighbor's horse and many times as wide. Each perfectly distributed in that part of the woods, as if for a troll's board game.

Atop some of those boulders grow century-old ironwood and ash trees, still sturdy, like giant, green-wicked candles sitting on colossal gray altars. Amid the world's warming, the roots of one tree remain healthy and as fat as the tree's trunk. They wrap creepily over the boulder's edge, crisscross, and weave toward the ground, peeling up layers of the rock like an accordion's fabric bellows, then appear to gingerly lift the boulder from the forest floor offering a mossy jade den perfectly suited for an orange newt—and all the magic you can imagine.

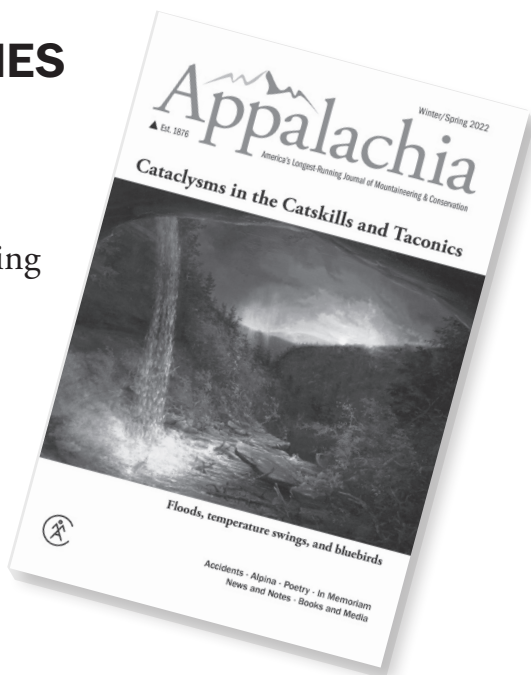
TRACY RACZEK is a climate policy expert who served ten years in the United Nations, including three under UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in the lead-up to the Paris Climate Agreement. She currently advises companies and foundations on their climate strategies, dividing days between New York City and her off-the-grid cabin in the Catskills.

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